



Coast Guard HR Flag Voice 86

BUILDING A HOUSE FOR DIVERSITY PART 2

This is the second of two parts. Please refer to Flag Voice 85. In Part 1, I retold the fable about the giraffe and the elephant. I began with the lessons we can learn from this "simple" story. The first was the true meaning of diversity. This Flag Voice will continue with some of the lessons. This Flag Voice is information extracted from "Building a House for Diversity," by R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr.

Lesson: The fable illustrates the traditional approaches to diversity. The three usual ways organizations have chosen to deal with diversity are affirmative action, understanding differences and diversity management.

When the giraffe decides to invite elephant to visit and makes a special effort to help him by widening the door, we are observing affirmative action. Affirmative action focuses on inclusion and taking special action to correct imbalances.

As a result of the affirmative action, the giraffe and elephant get along well. The giraffe invites the elephant in because he truly enjoys his company and wants to get to know him better. The elephant accepts the invitation for same reason. This is understanding differences. Understanding differences focuses on relationships and how people in organizations get along.

Then upon the disastrous visit, the giraffe proposes several corrective actions for the elephant. However, the elephant resists bearing the full burden of making the necessary changes; he thinks that maybe they should also modify the giraffe's house too. Diversity management is this two-way perspective. Diversity management seeks to create an environment that accesses the talents of all members.

Lesson: Different components of a diversity mixture have different perspectives.

The giraffe was horrified by the destruction created by the elephant. Note that the giraffe attributes this problem completely to the elephant. His automatic response was the elephant must change and abandon those unique qualities that make him an elephant. In essence he was saying, "Since you don't fit in my house, let's fix you."

Meanwhile, the elephant was not so sure it all was his fault. The elephant knows he will remain an elephant, no matter how much he exercises or how well he dances. He knows a house built for a giraffe will never be comfortable for him, no matter how many interests he and the owner genuinely share.

Unless the pair can come up with more creative solutions, their friendship is not likely to survive. In essence, their diversity exceeds their diversity management skills.

Lesson: Many are reluctant to embrace genuine diversity fully.

Not surprisingly, the giraffe hopes to "fix" the elephant. He likes his house the way it is; modifying the comfortable, award-winning house never entered his mind. The giraffe has been "rewarded" for this behavior by the "system" of giraffes, and "rewards" powerfully motivate to ensure repeat behavior. It will take a compelling reason to convince the giraffe he may have to change his comfortable house. He may very well likely decide to end the relationship instead.

Lesson: Diversity tension is inevitable.

Wherever different perspectives are found, tension will naturally exist. It is not a question of one or the other being at fault, but that tension is invariably present.

Clearly, both were horrified at the damage and potential impact on their new friendship. Both were also caught by surprise; neither anticipated bringing the elephant in would wreck the giraffe's "perfect" home. After all, they shared important interests!

Even if a joint giraffe/elephant team built the perfect giraffe/elephant house, they would still experience tension as they move past surface topics and became more genuine with each other. The challenge is how to persevere in becoming friends in midst of this ongoing tension.

Lesson: Complexity inevitably accompanies diversity.

Both are faced with a complex situation. The giraffe believes he could have lived in his comfortable house forever without this problem. He is more concerned about how he is going to repair it and who will pay, then the need for a long-term relationship with the elephant.

The elephant is mystified. He only paid an innocent visit, and on top of that was actually invited by the giraffe. How could it end up in such a disaster for both of them? With all of their good intentions and important interests, how could he still feel he didn't belong?

If both the giraffe and the elephant truly understand that something worthwhile is at stake, that they share a common interest in building a friendship, then to reject diversity because it creates tension and complexity is to make a decision not to grow and flourish!

Lesson: Whose house is it?

In this story, we observe a dominant group and subordinate group. The dynamics of diversity spring

from this mixture.

The dominant members are in control. They built the house (or their ancestors), they decide the policies, procedures, set up underlying assumptions for success and establish systems to reflect those assumptions. The giraffes know the unwritten rules for success because they created them. They know how to play the game to win, have a major say in who enters the organization, and whether those who enter will succeed or merely be tolerated.

The subordinate members have little to no power. They are newcomers, outsiders, and lack insider knowledge. The elephants somehow must figure out the unwritten rules for success and make necessary changes to adapt. Their own intrinsic needs are not incorporated into the organization's environment and they feel pressured to ignore or set them aside. To get along in someone else's house, they must leave their needs and their differences at the front door.

Lesson: Whose job is it to fix?

In the past, most members of the organization concluded that something so complex must be left to the upper-level managers/leaders. Let them first figure it out, then we'll follow their lead after all the hard work is done.

This is completely wrong! It is not simply a top of the organization issue to deal with. Everyone in the organization, top to bottom, contributes to "fixing" it. If genuine diversity is to thrive, then it is only because the right climate is created. This climate is the product of the beliefs and behaviors of all workforce members - all levels and all groups.

Properly nurturing this climate does not depend on simply how one group or another perceives diversity. It depends on the mindsets and actions of individual members of all groups and the way they interact with each other on a daily basis.

This is the most important lesson the giraffe and elephant can teach us: true diversity management begins and ends with individuals! It begins with each of us accepting our responsibility as actors in the diversity scenario, and it ends with our acquiring certain specific skills and achieving a level of maturity in our thinking and acting about diversity.

The giraffe and the elephant are obviously not there. The giraffe does not accept personal responsibility for diversity, and neither have much experience in the skills of diversity management. However, by us observing them, seeing what they lack and the disastrous consequences, I believe they have given us the most important lesson of all!

Again, I encourage you to discuss this story with other members in your workplace. Every time I reread the story, new insights come to light, especially as I relate them to my own experiences in the Coast Guard. Working better together, building on our similarities and leveraging our differences, is what

makes as a superior team to carry out our missions.

Regards, FL Ames

The Coast Guard Personnel Manual is now available on both the CG Web and the Internet. It can be accessed by going through Human Resources -- G-WP -- G-WPM -- G-WPM-1. The Internet address is: <http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-w/g-wp/g-wpm/WebHelp/WHStart.htm>



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